

## Thunderbolts: The Best of Times

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Summary: New Year's Eve 1999 becomes a solemn occasion as Hawkeye and Moonstone grieve for their fallen teammate.

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Continuity note: This story takes place during the somewhat jarring events of THUNDERBOLTS #35, and it deals with some \*major\* spoilers in that issue, so you've been warned.

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A.D. 1999.

Mount Charteris was located in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, putting it near the edge of the International Date Line that arbitrarily determined where the day began and ended. By now nearly half the world had celebrated the arrival of midnight--the top of the hour randomly designated to be the first of a new day--and celebrated the beginning of the year that was speciously numbered the two thousandth. An irrelevant milestone in this common era of meaningless intervals of time. As the new year crept across each time zone, it would eventually bring cause for celebration all the way to Colorado. But not Mount Charteris.

It was something of a secret that the mountain contained the base of the Thunderbolts--a band of superheroes who, for one reason or

another, were fugitives from the justice they tried to uphold. Unlike media scapegoats such as Spider-Man or misunderstood activists like the X-Men, the Thunderbolts were wanted for many outstanding crimes, ranging from resisting arrest to armed robbery to conspiring to overthrow approximately 170 different governments worldwide. It was the Thunderbolts' mission to prove to the populace that they could best repay their debt to society by being allowed to defend the innocent, with only the supervision of one reputable vigilante.

For Clint Barton, this was a most noble duty, since he himself had been given a chance to turn his life around through years of dedicated service in the Avengers, as "Hawkeye." When he took it upon himself to give the Thunderbolts that same chance, all he had to keep them in line was his unmatched marksmanship and the moxie to think that was all he needed. He'd gone to confront the Thunderbolts expecting them to make him kick their asses. Instead they lived up to and beyond his expectations.

But as he walked through the corridors of the enormous facility the team had commandeered to be their headquarters, Hawkeye knew there'd be no celebration of a successful year for the Thunderbolts under his leadership. Because he had failed.

There had been seven Thunderbolts at first. Baron Zemo had founded the team in a plot to conquer the world, and was obviously not a part of the team's decision to abandon his plans and reform. Techno was similarly uninterested in any moral agenda and went his own way. Moonstone had led the T-bolts to their new direction for purely self-interested reasons, but had recently begun to exhibit some sense of nobility. Atlas was a hardened criminal who just needed an opportunity to make something better of himself. Songbird wasn't so bad, but her life had been so hard that she was skeptical that Hawkeye would want to help her out of the kindness of his heart. MACH-1 was a convicted murderer, but he turned himself in to the authorities as a sacrifice to give the Thunderbolts some credibility. Jolt had no criminal record...

Hawkeye stopped on his trek through the dark, empty halls to break the silence by pounding against the nearest wall. Jolt had no criminal record. The young girl had developed super powers in the captivity of a mad scientist and desperately sought out superheroic help to stop him. At the time, the Thunderbolts were trying to defraud the United Nations into giving them vital security access codes, so they were trapped by their own deception and offered Jolt a place on the team. She was the only sincere hero, a fan of the Avengers that the Thunderbolts had (in previous guises) menaced. Her only crime was aiding and abetting known criminals...aiding them in changing for the better.

Now she was dead. Dead because she had tried to help the Thunderbolts instead of leaving them to get killed in some stupid world domination scheme. Dead because Hawkeye insisted that she and his first recruit to the T-bolts, Charcoal, finish high school to get a decent education. Dead because, while Hawkeye led the adult Thunderbolts into a public relations fiasco with the Hulk, Jolt and Charcoal were finishing their day at school and standing in the sights of some nutcase sniper.

He held back his tears and regained his composure. The Thunderbolts' base had been like a mausoleum since they returned from the Hulk

battle and discovered Jolt had been shot. Songbird was still recovering from a concussion. Charcoal hadn't even fought the Hulk, but he'd spent most of the past few days sleeping later and later. Atlas was keeping to himself. The Ogre--a former X-Men nuisance and the Thunderbolts' resident technical support--had never been very sociable to begin with. The team was heartbroken; Christmas had come and gone without notice. New Year's Eve was shaping up the same way.

Hawkeye was certainly in no mood to celebrate, but a few weeks before Jolt's death he had stashed away some champagne for the occasion. Now he was heading to the storage cell to retrieve them, and the only occasion he was interested in was getting numb. He didn't have to open the door to figure out he'd have company.

"Karla," he said, as if taking an inventory of the room's contents.

Moonstone was huddled against the corner of the storage cell, with Hawkeye's three bottles--one completely empty--of champagne sitting next to her. "You'll excuse me if I started early," she muttered. "When you can stand up from the Hulk's best uppercut, it's harder to get inebriated. I was just about to start the second bottle, if you want to--"

"Yeah, whatever." Hawkeye sat down next to her and picked up a bottle. He wrestled with the cork for a few seconds before cursing himself for forgetting to bring a corkscrew, and then remembering his companion was strong enough to bench press ten tons. He held the bottle between them and let her flick the cork off with her fingernail. "Looks like you had the same idea as me," he said as he took a swig, "nobody's gonna be usin' this for anything else tonight."

She shook her head as he passed the bottle to her. "Don't--don't remind me. I spent about fifteen minutes counseling Charlie about his depression. I asked him to talk about that day--what he and Hallie did at school, what they talked about--and he said she was still upset about school..."

Hawkeye blinked. "I thought you had helped her with that. She was hung up about all her friends in New York getting killed during the Onslaught thing, right? I thought she was dealing with it..."

Moonstone hung her head. "So did I." Once she'd been a talented and amoral psychiatrist, Dr. Karla Sofen, and used her cunning to unethically obtain the superpowers that had led her into the Thunderbolts. She'd used everyone she'd ever known as pawns, but recently she was beginning to have stirrings of honor, of selflessness, of love, of guilt...and of failure. "Charlie thinks she might have been pretending to come to terms with her Onslaught trauma to get us off her back about it. I...couldn't talk to him after he told me that. Haw--Clint, I--"

"It's okay, Karla. Just 'cause you're a shrink doesn't mean you have to be there for everybody else. Nobody expects you to be invincible."

"I do," she snapped. "I should have seen she was trying to get out of

our sessions, and I shouldn't have taken it personally when Charlie told me she...she deceived me." She had nothing but contempt for herself. All her life she'd told herself she was better than this--better than the self-pitying basket case she'd become. But no matter how much she spited her feelings, they were overwhelming her. "God...she hated me, Clint...she convinced me I was helping her just so she wouldn't have to talk to me..."

Hawkeye put his arm around her. "Hey now, that ain't true..."

"You don't know," she sobbed. "It wasn't just that we lied to her when we were scamming the world. I brought her into the team to undermine Zemo...the others loved her, so I was going to use her to win their loyalty." She leaned against him, sniffing, and tried to bring herself to admit the rest. "And I told her she was like a daughter to me...and when she found out we were supervillains, she knew all about my reputation for manipulating people and--" She couldn't go any further.

He didn't know what to say to that, but he had to try. "She must've been pretty torn up, then."

"God, I remember the look on her face when she confronted me...she was so angry...and I just...dammit, I was smiling..."

Hawkeye was stunned. He sat there quietly for a moment, holding Moonstone tight and taking long drinks from his champagne bottle. It was not a good time for him to be hearing about anyone hurting Jolt, and it was even harder to accept that Moonstone had hurt her so deeply...and so casually. He knew the woman in his arms had been trouble--he'd faced off with her several times on opposite sides of the various Avengers/Masters of Evil battles. He expected her to be dubious, even when they began to flirt a little. But this...

He stared at the champagne, and wished he'd gotten something stronger.

"I'm sorry, Clint...I'm so sorry...I just didn't care until I realized she was gone...and I'd never get to make up for it..."

"I...I dunno, Karla." He fumbled for the right thing to say, but he wasn't the Ph.D. around here. "I guess I feel kinda guilty too, the way Hallie was all gung-ho about the Avengers, and then I show up and act like some drill sergeant. I always treated her like just another crook for me to whip into shape, and then I realized she was just a kid who had some bad breaks. That's the only reason I sent her and Charlie to school--and I still hate that the last thing I said to her was to quit complaining and go to class while the rest of us went into action."

She looked up to his face, tears still streaming down her own. "It--it wasn't your fault...she always looked up to the Avengers--she wanted us to be just like you..."

"And look where it got her!" Hawkeye threw the nearly-empty bottle across the room, shattering it against the far side. Some hero he'd turned out to be. Ever since the Avengers let he, Quicksilver, and the Scarlet Witch redeem themselves under the leadership of Captain America, he'd always looked up to the World War II hero. "Cap's Kooky

Quartet" had even been his inspiration to take over the Thunderbolts, with himself in Steve Rogers's role. Now he knew why it ate at Steve that he had watched his young partner Bucky Barnes die tragically near the end of the war.

But Cap didn't let the pain keep him from his responsibilities to the Avengers, and Hawkeye had learned that well. "The point I'm makin' is, everybody in this team has screwed up at one time or another. We've all done bad things. You've always been a different kinda bad, Karla, but...I don't hold it against you. The T-bolts are all about movin' \*past\* that stuff. And that was Hallie's idea."

Moonstone whimpered softly, her head resting on Hawkeye's chest like a pillow, moved beyond words by what he was saying. "I...I don't know what's been happening to me, Clint...back when you joined the team I didn't give a damn about anyone but myself, and now I'm blubbering over what everyone thinks of me. You probably hate me for what I did to Hallie..."

"Karla, you've tried to kill my friends, you helped wreck Avengers Mansion, you took advantage of the world thinking me and some other guys were dead. The second thing I did when I got back from bein' 'dead' was get shot at by you. And I \*still\* don't hate you. Maybe I'm just stupid or somethin', but..."

"You're \*not\* stupid, Clint. And you're not a failure, either."

"And \*you're\* not some ice-queen bitch."

"I'll admit, though, you \*are\* certifiably insane..."

"Like I needed a professional to tell me that."

There was an interminable pause as Hawkeye and Moonstone let the emotions of the day sink in, reflecting on everything that had transpired. It was only after several long moments that either of them felt like saying anything, or knew what to say.

"So..." Hawkeye mused.

"Yes," Moonstone replied.

"Has this all been an act, Karla? The flirting, I mean? I won't hold a grudge about it if you were tryin' to use me, but...if it's not for real, then I--"

She turned away from him, afraid to answer. "I...no...not anymore...I don't know..."

Hawkeye sighed and wished she had figured it out before she kissed him during a training session and stripped naked. "The T-bolts don't trust you to do right by me. They aren't tellin' me to boot you off the team, they just don't think you're any good for me personally. And I meant what I said before about not hating you, but...don't string me along, Karla."

"I don't know how I feel about anything anymore, Clint. I feel like I'm going mad most of the time." Moonstone put her hand to her temple and tried to sort out her thoughts. "And I'm always thinking about

you..."

"OK."

"If I say I...care about you, then what happens? Do I have to start agreeing with you even if you're wrong? Will we move into the same quarters? Are you going to expect to sleep with me even when I just want to be left alone? I can't deal with any of this, Clint--I've always looked out for Number One, and I never ever thought--"

"Number One could be someone else?"

"Exactly."

"I can understand that. It ain't easy being 'the world's mightiest marksman,' y'know," Hawkeye boasted. "Takes a lot of focus, and it was hard givin' any of it up to my wife. Till she died, at any rate. Seems like the whole time we were either goin' at it like rabbits or fighting. We moved too fast, I think. I know what's botherin' you, Karla, and it's okay, 'cause I've been there, and I know you gotta right to be afraid."

"So, it's okay?"

"It'll all be okay. Don't worry about how you used to be; look at it like a whole new Moonstone for the 21st century..."

Moonstone smiled--the first time in a long time that she did so out of pure joy, and not smug satisfaction--and hugged the leader of the Thunderbolts. "You're too good for me, Clint Barton...but the next century doesn't start until \*next\* year..."

Hawkeye groaned. "Oh, don't tell me your one of \*those\* types...sheesh. What was it I read? When a baby is born, it doesn't start off as one year old..."

"It's not a baby," she giggled, "it's a calendar. There wasn't a year 0, so..."

"Says who?"

"Dionysius Exiguus, if I'm not mistaken..."

"Bushwah! Far as the Hawkeye Calendar goes, the new millennium starts right \*now\*! All I need is a big event to start counting from..."

Moonstone sniffled and wiped away her tears. "I love you, you lunatic."

Hawkeye shrugged, as if to say "that's as good an event as any," and kissed her. They forgot about their sorrows and came to terms with Jolt's death, albeit temporarily. There was no clock in the small storage room, and neither of them noticed the time. In a few hours, minor power shortages across the state would call the Thunderbolts into action, and they'd resume their grief for their teammate. But for the moment, Clint Barton and Karla Sofen had found time and cause to celebrate the stroke of midnight.

A.D. 2000.

End  
file.